



Clean, Cohesive, Crisp and Confident



Bread and Bones: *I Know Stories*, released June 2008

"I'll grind your bones to make my...songs?"

CD review by Jeff Trippe

Photo at left:

Bread and Bones, Mitch Barron, Beth Duquette, and Richard Ruane. Photo by Rick Fitzsimmons

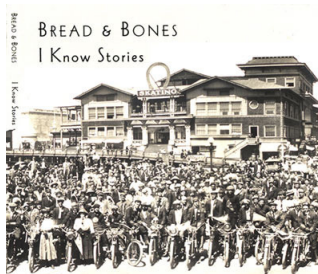
Bread and Bones, a trio of skilled musicians from Vermont, debuted their CD *I Know Stories*, this past summer. The project's clean, cohesive sound and the group's sincere delivery of vocalist Richard Ruane's songs mark them as "an act to watch" on the New England acoustic scene and beyond. In short, they are the little trio that could, and probably will.

This is not to say that they are new on the scene, however. Between Ruane, singer Beth Duquette, and bassist Mitch Barron, they have shared stages with powerhouses such as [Pete Seeger](#), [Phish](#), [Robin Williamson](#), and [Steve Gillette](#). And as their bio notes, Ruane has been a songwriting finalist in important competitions such as the [Kerrville Folk Festival](#) and the [Plowshares Coffeehouse](#). Nonetheless, when we untangle the trappings that come with appearing on the public music circuit (even on the relatively obscure folk market), when we do away with the comparisons to better-known artists (and music reviewers are very fond of making such comparisons), and when we dismiss our personal biases and preferences concerning this music, we are left with one question: is it any good?

In the case of Bread and Bones, it is. Their playing and singing are crisp and confident: Ruane's work on guitar is full of finesse and creativity, yet he is too humble to dive into waters ruled by "hot flatpickers." Similarly, Ms. Duquette's harmony and lead vocals are clear and to the point but not overly adorned. And – to my ear at least – Barron's sparse, deep backing on both upright bass and fretless electric puts the real stamp on this music as original, from-the-shoulder, and very much alive.

But as we see demonstrated time and again, technical ability alone does not a good record make; good songs help a lot. Enter Ruane. He possesses the three critical tools necessary to any writer in any genre – narrative sensibility, a poet's ear, and a sense of humor. As one might anticipate, many of his subjects are distinctively American: "My Father Is Gone" indulges the time-honored tradition of the coal-mining accident (though in this case, it is given added weight by Ruane's own family ties to the coal country around Scranton, Pennsylvania), and "I Was Not Born Here" revisits the significance of the immigrant's story in America. "Bread and Bones" picks up the trail of the outlaw fugitive, and though the accused in this narrative is not as brutal as predecessors such as [John Hardy](#) and Wild Bill Jones, he finds that playing with knives takes him no place good in a hurry.

The title track, "I Know Stories," is a special song. It seems to re-examine the Jack and the Beanstalk tale not from Jack's point of view, but from the Giant's, and there we find sympathy for a heart in torment. Ruane shows us that perhaps we are really more like the big doofus who vaguely senses that some sort of fall is imminent, that the story will not end well. The writer's notes explain, "Sometimes this song seems to be an allegory and sometimes it doesn't." I would say that sort of ambiguity is exactly what we are all seeking in our own stories.



Yet tucked into the middle of these layers of meaning is a timeless gem, the decidedly un-allegorical "Fair and Tender Ladies," which Beth Duquette offers in what must be the clear tones straight from the heart of the crystal-eyed maiden who watched her false lover turn his back. It's a little stroke of genius on the part of Bread and Bones to anchor their record with this one; it seems to bring the streams of their other journeys through minor keys and turns of unexpected chords back again to their place of origin.

In all, there are substantial rewards here for the listener. Bread and Bones knows stories, and we should get to know them.

You can purchase "I Know Stories" on CD Baby at <http://cdbaby.com/all/folkfood>. The band will appear at the [North Star Music Café](#) in Portland on Nov. 22 at 8:00 PM, with [Bob McKillop](#) opening.

(Full disclosure - Bob McKillop is the editor of MaineFolkMusic.com)